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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR A/S WELCH'S 5/15-17/07 VISIT TO
LEBANON

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) David: You last visited Lebanon in August 2006. Then, as now, Lebanon was in deep crisis. Yet the impact of today's crisis -- when Syria's allies seek to paralyze and make irrelevant the cabinet of Fouad Siniora and then install a pro-Syrian president in autumn -- stands in sharp contrast to the July 2006 crisis, when Hizballah dragged Lebanon to war with Israel. Then, facing bombs and displacement, the Lebanese rallied around the PM and his cabinet. Siniora enjoyed consensus support for his "seven points," including its call for the state to have a monopoly on arms. Today, the Lebanese are divided, with Siniora viciously portrayed by Hizballah, Michel Aoun, and their partners as a U.S.-directed puppet almost gleefully selling out Lebanon's sovereignty and Arab identity.

12. (S) While still a minority view, too many Lebanese, including nearly all the Shia, swallowed this Syrian-concocted venom. Also worrying, a growing number of those once identified with the March 14 bloc -- and who still sympathize with the movement's principles of freedom, unity, and democracy -- are "tuning out" in disgust at the political stalemate. Even March 14 activists worry about pro-Syrian "evidence" purportedly showing that the USG and others are losing interest in Lebanon and favor re-engagement with Syria, due to larger, regional considerations.

13. (S) Thus, we suggest using your visit to promote three goals simultaneously:

-- Shore up the ranks of the March 14 movement by showing that U.S. and international support for Lebanon remains unshakable and non-negotiable. Your visit will help reassure March 14 leaders and supporters alike of continued, strong U.S. interest.

-- Inspire those becoming disillusioned with politics by reminding them of the incredible opportunity they now have for securing that Lebanon's future remains in the hands of the Lebanese. Upcoming presidential elections are something to be embraced, not feared.

-- Complicate the ability of Siniora's enemies to use your visit to weaken him, by crafting a public and private message that resonates beyond March 14 circles. They expect us to support March 14: what can we say to the rest of the Lebanese? By talking about a hopeful, inclusive vision for

the future that nearly all Lebanese share -- a prosperous, democratic, united, sovereign Lebanon at peace with its neighbors -- we can underscore that we are not seeking to isolate or disenfranchise any of Lebanon's communities. To the extent that we can speak beyond Lebanon, of the Arab peace initiative and of our hope that Palestinians will soon have a state to call their own, we also speak to all the Lebanese, rather than just March 14 supporters.

OPPOSITION TO SINIORA

14. (S) The consensus that the PM once enjoyed was intentionally shattered by Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah in autumn. Nasrallah leads the charge that Siniora's allegedly subservient relationship with the USG has, at best, resulted in nothing for Lebanon and, at worst, put Lebanon at the mercy of Israel and under a "foreign mandate." Defying expectations, Siniora -- whose hyper-cautiousness and excruciatingly slow deliberative nature often exasperate us -- has been astonishingly resolute, withstanding an assault that includes the walk-out of Syria-aligned ministers and the assassination of Pierre Gemayel in November, a sit-in outside Siniora's offices beginning in December, violent street demonstrations in January, commuter bus bombings in February, and the insistence by pro-Syrians that the Siniora cabinet is null and void. But while still in office, the PM and his cabinet are decidedly weakened (as, arguably, are those who tried but failed to remove him) and find it increasingly hard to take, implement, or enforce decisions.

15. (S) For a while, it looked as though the two sides -- March 8-Aoun and March 14-GOL -- had exhausted themselves into a draw. But, over the past week, rhetoric against Siniora has escalated sharply, suggesting to his advisors

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that pro-Syrians are mobilizing for a dangerous new phase. The ever-cautious PM strives to avoid giving any excuse for renewed street action. He will thus seek ways to reduce the chances that your visit becomes the spark for Hizballah to reoccupy the largely abandoned "tent city" downtown. He will look less for USG support of him (which is a given) and more for something to grab positive attention and defy expectations, such as -- Siniora is nothing if not consistent -- a promising word on Sheba' Farms. (For an otherwise smart man, Siniora is remarkably blind to the political realities of Israel.)

16. (S) Hizballah and its allies may even seize upon your visit to repeat the tiresome charge that the USG is working secretly with Siniora to "implant" the largely Sunni

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Palestinian refugee population permanently in Lebanon, to give the Sunnis a surge of demographic power at the expense of the Christians and Shia. To avoid giving fodder to those who use this issue politically against us, when the question of the "right of return" is raised -- as it often is -- we state simply that, once the question of Palestinian refugees can be addressed, certainly Lebanon's special needs and concerns will be taken into account.

TRIBUNAL, CONSIDERED FAIT ACCOMPLI

17. (S) You are arriving in Lebanon on a day when the news is dominated by Siniora's letter to UNSYG Ban requesting UNSC approval of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. One of the propaganda tools against Siniora has been potential UNSC Chapter VII approval of the tribunal. The same people who blocked parliamentary approval process in Lebanon now scream that Siniora's request to the UN is akin to treason. Yet curiously, now that we are on the threshold of UNSC action to create the tribunal, the level of rhetorical protests on this

issue has dropped. It seems that, across the political spectrum, everyone sees the tribunal as a fait accompli (which, of course, it is not). Pro-Syrians are no longer fighting the creation of the tribunal in favor of promoting a stance that they simply will not cooperate with any tribunal created under Chapter VII. Since the tribunal won't be immediately operational, we predict little immediate impact of this refusal to cooperate, although we are likely to face a crisis later. Siniora, who worries that a UNSC failure to establish the tribunal will lead to a collapse of his cabinet that has staked so much on the tribunal, will seek your views on timing and prospects for action in New York. If he has more homework to garner UNSC support, we should push him to move quickly.

CABINET CRISIS UNRESOLVED

18. (S) While the UNSC underscored recently that the Siniora cabinet is the legitimate government of Lebanon, the lack of Shia representation, a gap created by the Shia ministers themselves, unquestionably creates problems in sectarian-sensitive Lebanon. The demand for a National Unity Cabinet that would include Aoun and give a blocking minority to Hizballah and its allies is the ostensible justification for the anti-Siniora protests. The PM and others propose various solutions. Siniora offers a 17-13 cabinet on the basis of a new agreed cabinet agenda; some speculate that the resigned ministers will return to work as caretakers; others favor a technocratic cabinet until presidential elections. We do not believe that either bloc is serious about fixing the cabinet before having more clarity regarding presidential elections. In the meantime, President Lahoud maintains that the cabinet has ceased to exist, leading to fears that he will appoint a competing PM, creating a "two government" scenario akin to the disastrous 1988-1990 period. We see increasing evidence that the "two government" scenario is, indeed, what the pro-Syrians intend to create.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

19. (S) With the tribunal seen as a fait accompli and no serious negotiations underway regarding the cabinet, the Lebanese focus increasingly on the November 24 expiration of Lahoud's extended term as the opportunity to solve this crisis or, alternatively, as the time Lebanon will descend definitively into chaos and civil war. Unless assured they

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approve the choice, the pro-Syrians and Aoun threaten to boycott the parliament session that will elect Lahoud's successor. While the March 14 majority will most likely elect a new president despite a boycott, he (or she -- lest we forget Nayla Mouawad) would suffer problems of legitimacy due to quorum questions and to the lack of Shia participation in the voting. This, too, would lead to a "two government" crisis, with the March 8-Aoun bloc following a Lahoud-appointed cabinet and uncertainty over how the army would react.

110. (S) March 14 leaders -- at least those who are not presidential candidates themselves -- tell us privately that, with the tribunal established and Syria on the defensive, they will consider a "consensus" president to avoid the two-government confrontation everyone fears. Patriarch Sfeir, too, favors a president with credibility that bridges the political divide. In theory, this is a sensible approach in this dangerously divided country. But the question is whether the pro-Syrians will consider a truly independent figure. We suspect that Hizballah will propose a candidate unacceptable to March 14 (i.e., Aoun), in order to trade for one who appears reasonable but who in fact will be controlled by Syria. The Patriarch is aware of this danger, but he is also concerned that March 14 Muslims -- Hariri and Jumblatt -- could do the same, trading an acceptable Christian for one

under their influence.

¶11. (S) As you will be asked about presidential elections, we suggest that you note that everyone in Lebanon and the international community agrees on the importance of elections on time and in accordance with the constitution, free of outside interference. A two-government scenario is in no one's interest. We can avoid interpreting the ambiguous quorum requirement by referring to the Patriarch's statements that there is no more important responsibility for any MP than to show up to cast a vote for president. And, obviously, no: the U.S. does not have a candidate, but we are confident that the successful choice will be committed to Lebanon's freedom and democracy. We have been asking people recently to think ahead about how, ideally, they would like to see Lebanon politically and economically six years from now (when the new president's term expires) and then suggesting that they consider which presidential candidate can best move Lebanon in that direction. When thinking ahead, few favor a pro-Syrian candidate.

HIZBALLAH'S ARMS

¶12. (S) Given the focus on the tribunal, cabinet crisis, and presidential elections, little has happened practically to restrict Hizballah's arms. Politically, the picture is a bit more encouraging: Saad Hariri at last questions Hizballah's arms even publicly, and Siniora's renewed emphasis on the "seven points" from last summer indicates his commitment to the supremacy of the state (while again underscoring his ideas on Sheba' Farms). The German pilot project on the northern border now has funding (including quiet partnership with the USG regarding communications) and is proceeding well, if slowly. We await the arrival of a UN team to look at the Syrian-Lebanese border soon. But arms smuggling continues, and Iranian-funded land purchases are reportedly linking the Hizballah-controlled south to Hizballah-controlled parts of the Biqa'. While there have been a few "good news" stories (including the Lebanese army seizure of weapons claimed by Hizballah), the GOL has not undertaken any serious, sustained efforts to control Hizballah's arms or stop smuggling. This is another reason why the presidency is so important: the cabinet could more easily take meaningful steps, if the president is on the side of the state.

SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

¶13. (S) Not unreasonably, Siniora and others are obsessed with security concerns: you will note that everyone we visit, fearful of assassination, is holed up in fortified compounds, and those political figures who come to see you at the Embassy will be accompanied by many bodyguards. Besides the worry about Hizballah and its allies seizing on an excuse to provoke populist demonstrations that could easily turn violent (a worry that explains why the GOL has never moved to

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clear the downtown streets of the sit-in tents), the threats are credible that al-Qaida is planning attacks against Lebanese and international institutions. The GOL fears Syrian-backed terrorist groups will conduct more assassinations or random attacks such as the February bus bombings. Few people believe that the murder of two young Lebanese three weeks ago was simply a clan feud. The question does not seem to be whether Lebanon will suffer another terrorist attack but when. We are providing constant assistance, and, happily, rival Lebanese security agencies, aware of the seriousness of the threats, are working in closer coordination than we have seen before.

YOUR MEETINGS

¶14. (S) Your meetings are naturally heavily weighted in favor of the March 14 alliance with its agenda that overlaps our own regarding Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. Besides your discussions with PM Siniora, three March 14 leaders -- former President Amine Gemayel, MP Walid Jumblatt, and MP Saad Hariri -- will host meals for you. You will also meet with a group of March 14 Christians (including Nayla Mouawad, Nassib Lahoud, and Boutros Harb) as well as, separately, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. Lest we be accused of not listening to the other side, we have also arranged for Michel Aoun to come to my residence to see you and for you to meet with Parliament Speaker Berri (a meeting that also helps check the Shia confessional box). We have also arranged for meetings with Patriarch Sfeir and Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Sleiman.

¶15. (S) In addition, we welcome using your visit to highlight USG contributions to the American Educational Institutions in Lebanon, after giving more than \$64 million over the past decade. We have arranged for you to present a check for \$970,000 to Lebanese American University President Joseph Jabra (who met with the Secretary recently in Washington) and 5-6 LAU students, as part of the USG's support of scholarships for LAU.

¶16. (S) In terms of points to make in the major meetings, for Siniora, the agenda is obvious: winning UNSC approval of the tribunal, Siniora's ideas on solving the cabinet crisis, stopping arms smuggling, upcoming presidential elections. Siniora will bring up Sheba' Farms and his view about an appropriate response to the Arab peace initiative. Restricted to what he can achieve inside Lebanon given the pro-Syrian boycott of his cabinet, Siniora in many of his conversations is now reverting to the (frequently tiresome) pan-Arab sentiments he carried with him to office and which he deployed to such ill effect during Secretary Rice's first meeting with him in July 2005, at the start of his premiership.

¶17. (S) With Berri, we suggest focusing on the need for Berri to open parliament before the expiration on May 31 of the ordinary session. This will build on the demands of the Lebanese themselves. Berri has indicated privately (Beirut 655) that, despite being responsible, even he is uncomfortable with the implications of the shuttered parliament. We guess that Berri does not want to lose the international connections and legitimacy that accrue to him due to his position, and, indeed, many of our contacts have suggested to us that we emphasize to Berri the need for him to think of his long-term reputation and prospects. Berri will want a signal from us that we are not going to impose our own presidential candidate. We recommend underscoring how important it is for his bloc to show up for the presidential elections rather than try to defeat the democratic choice by using the quorum tool as a veto.

¶18. (S) Patriarch Sfeir's surprise 5/11 visit to Lahoud suggests that the Patriarch may have been sparked to activism either by belated desperation by the seriousness of Lebanon's political crisis or by a stern warning from the Vatican. While your meeting with Sfeir is mostly intended to reassure Lebanon's Christians of our support, we recommend reminding Sfeir that he is the one person who may be able to prevent a presidency controlled either by Syria or by March 14 Muslims (Hariri and Jumblatt): while he will not choose a candidate for fear of splitting his own community, we should encourage him to make clear which candidates are unacceptable. We also suggest reinforcing to him the serious danger Michel Aoun's

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alliance with Hizballah poses for his relationship with us and thus for the future of Lebanon's Christians.

¶19. (S) LAF Commander Michel Sleiman is frequently talked of (although, tellingly, not by the Patriarch) as a "compromise" presidential candidate. People in touch with

Emile Lahoud claim that the pro-Syrians are counting on the LAF to side with the "second government," should Lahoud appoint one. Your meeting with Sleiman (which is not yet confirmed) will be a good opportunity to underscore that our strong support for the LAF is based in large measure to the LAF's upholding of the legitimate institutions of Lebanon. Subtly, you can help remind him of the cost to his reputation of siding with a government appointed by a man on his way out and recognized by only Syria and Iran.

¶20. (S) Your meeting with General Aoun is one of the last opportunities for Aoun to show us that he can be as constructive and moderate as his increasingly desperate followers claim he wants to be. We have pointed out to Aoun's followers (who have come to us in increasing numbers to urge bridge-building with the General) that the General's views seem to be to appease Syria, to appease Hizballah, but to confront Siniora. We have noted that such an approach will naturally limit our enthusiasm for cooperation with Aoun. They have promised that you will hear of a new, positive initiative. We'll see. We should caution him of the cost to his reputation and relations with us of taking steps such as ordering his MPs to boycott a parliamentary session to elect the president or of backing a Lahoud-appointed faux cabinet. (He may not care, but at least he will be sufficiently forewarned.)

¶21. (S) For the March 14 figures -- Gemayel, Hariri, Jumblatt, Geagea, the other Christians -- the message is as much the camera spray at the start of each meeting, demonstrating our solidarity, as the substance. But we need to continue to push them to come up with a compelling message to the Lebanese about why the Lebanese should continue to support the March 14 bloc: what is the vision that March 14 offers to Lebanon's future? The pro-Syrians and the political stalemate they have created have done much to tarnish March 14's reputation, and March 14 leaders have not exactly been nimble with developing a counter PR strategy. An occasional March 14 meeting with communique (such as took place last night) is not sufficient to persuade the average Lebanese that March 14 is the future.

¶21. (U) David, my staff and I look forward to welcoming you back to Beirut.
FELTMAN